From the "Horseshoe of Slums" to *Colonias Proletarias*: The Transformation of Mexico City's "Housing Problem", 1930–1960

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ABSTRACTS

Der Aufsatz untersucht Mexico City's „Wohnungsproblem" zwischen 1930 und 1960 aus der Sicht von Wohnungsexperten. In den 1930er Jahren begriffen Architekten und Planer Mexico City im Sinne der nordatlantischen Kategorien eines Ernest Burgess als ein Modell konzentrischer Zonen. Entsprechend interpretierten sie zentrale Slum-Bezirke als drängendstes Wohnungsproblem. Diese Sicht verschleierte jedoch den Blick auf eine wichtige urbane Veränderung, die Entstehung „informeller" Wohnbezirke in den Peripherien, und auf die Tatsache, dass sich diese entgegen der damaligen Erwartung positiv entwickelten. Untersucht werden Netzwerke von Architekten, Planern und Ökonomen in Mexiko und im pan-amerikanischen Kontext. Innerhalb von zwei Jahrzehnten mutierten periphere Siedlungen von unsichtbaren Räumen und temporären Quartieren zu praktikablen Lösungen des „Wohnungsproblems".

This article charts how housing experts dealt with Mexico City's "housing problem" between 1930 and 1960. In the 1930s, architects and planners understood Mexico City through such North-Atlantic categories as Ernest Burgess' concentric zone model, an approach that led them to target central "slums" as the city's most pressing "housing problem." But these models distorted and rendered invisible one of the city's most original transformations: the construction of "informal" neighbourhoods in its peripheries and the fact that these neighbourhoods were, against widespread expectations, improving over time. By following a network of architects, planners, and economists working in Mexico while engaging in a broader Panamerican dialogue, I describe how Mexico City's housing policies and ideas shifted. In the course of two mere decades, the city's peripheral neighbourhoods went from invisible spaces to problematic and provisional settlements to a viable solution to the housing problem.

In the mind of mid-century architects, planners, sociologists, and economists, Mexico City's "housing problem" (*problema de la vivienda*) was, by definition, the problem of the slum – *tugurio* in Spanish. Half a million dwellers lived in overcrowded and unhygienic slums north and east of Mexico City's central square. Urgent measures were needed, policy reports and muckraking articles alerted, to prevent *tugurios* from choking the city centre and spreading their influence to the modern and sanitary city. In the 1930s, the area became known as a "horseshoe of slums" (*herradura de tugurios*). The moniker stuck, as the northeast of the city was long stigmatized as an unhygienic, uncultured (indigenous), and immoral space. But the term would also become popular, among both Mexican and foreign observers, because labelling the area as a slum made it legible as a local iteration of global processes of industrialization, rural-urban migration, and urban growth and decay.

The legibility and hypervisibility of the slum, however, rendered invisible – at least in the eyes of housing experts – Mexico City's fastest growing form of low-income housing: *colonias proletarias* (proletarian neighbourhoods). *Colonias proletarias* were a political *and* a policy solution to the housing needs of a city that had just undergone a revolution and was in the midst of a population "explosion." While the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) was primarily an agrarian affair, it also transformed the political discourse, the balance of power between elites and popular groups, and the legal framework of Mexican cities. Built in the peripheries of Mexico City starting in the 1920s and 1930s, *colonias proletarias* were intimately entangled with government officials and independent brokers that deftly managed and secured their place in the city at the interstices between legality and illegality. While most *colonias proletarias* broke urban codes and ordinances, they also enjoyed ample political legitimacy during the 1930s and 1940s. Government support for *colonias proletarias* ranged from allowing their construction in defiance of city codes to more proactive actions such as expropriating land and selling it in installments to workers. Regardless of government actions, the impetus for the construction of *colonias proletarias* came from thousands of families who organized to make claims for land, housing, and urban services in the city's peripheral districts.

Up until the 1950s, however, *colonias proletarias* were outside of the field of vision of the housing experts dealing with Mexico City's "housing problem." Therefore, this article asks when and why housing experts realized that the ground under their feet was shifting, and how they dealt with this new scenario. It describes how, in the course of a couple of decades, *colonias proletarias* went from invisible spaces, to a Mexican version of a Latin American "explosion" of "squatter settlements," to a viable (if far from perfect) solution to the "housing problem," a sequence that illuminates similar changes in other Latin American cities. The first section describes the housing problem during the 1930s and 1940s, focusing on *tugurios* and the wealth of surveys, policies, and theories of housing, urbanism, and poverty that they generated. I then centre on the emergence of *colonias proletarias* as a policy category, analyzing how they challenged entrenched notions of urban poverty and the housing problem. Finally, the third section reframes the counter-

point between *tugurios* and *colonias proletarias* within a larger hemispheric debate about urbanization, social change, and the Latin American city.

The gap between transnational urban models and the singular history of Mexico City is a recurring thread throughout my narrative. That Mexico City was not merely a site where "foreign" models were implemented is a point that (I hope) no longer needs repeating.[1] Mexico City was one among several cities – at times more central, at others more peripheral – where theories, policies, and representations of urban growth, housing, and poverty were generated, debated, and disseminated in the years between 1930 and 1960. In the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, portrayals of poverty in Mexico City by filmmaker Luis Buñuel and anthropologist Oscar Lewis reverberated across the world (both the "Global North" and the "Global South") among scholarly, policymaking, and intellectual circles.[2] "Los Olvidados" (screened in the United States as "The Young and the Damned") and *The Children of Sánchez* scandalized audiences worldwide, much to the dismay of political elites eager to project to the world a "Mexican Miracle" of stability and development. To the extent that it was set in Mexico City's "horseshoe of slums," the work of Buñuel and Lewis conjured a well-known plot of poverty, violence, and social disorder. Therefore, notwithstanding the centrality of Mexico City within an international circuit of representations, theories, and policies, *colonias proletarias* remained largely invisible, at least when seen from the vantage point of the transnational dialogue about cities and urbanism taking place between 1930 and 1960. This invisibility was extremely consequential for it refracted and distorted – for both Mexican and foreign experts – the politics and policies of housing in Mexico City.

1. The War Against *Tugurios*

In 1880, Mexico City counted approximately a quarter million souls and roughly the same area as it had at the time of Mexican Independence (1821). After decades of stagnation, the city remained anchored to its colonial grid, although seismic change was about to take place. Mexico's post-independence civil wars came to an end in the 1860s, and the following decade the modernizing dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz launched an era of political stability and economic growth that transformed the country and its capital city. Driven by public works and a churning real-estate market, Mexico City began a process of growth, reaching a population of 470,000 in 1910, the year of the Mexican Revolution. A decade of war slowed population growth, but the city continued its expansion

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1   There is a rich and growing corpus of authors who have deprovincialized urban studies. In thinking about Latin American cities and their relationship with the world (and their relationship to a universal idea of what a city is), I have been inspired by B. Sarlo, Una Modernidad Periférica: Buenos Aires, 1920 y 1930, Buenos Aires 1988; A. Gorelik, Miradas Sobre Buenos Aires: Historia Cultural y Crítica Urbana, Buenos Aires 2004; M. Tenorio, I Speak of the City: Mexico City at the Turn of the Twentieth Century, Chicago 2012 and J. Robinson, Ordinary Cities: Between Modernity and Development, New York 2006.

2   K. Rosenblatt, Other Americas: Transnationalism, Scholarship, and the Culture of Poverty in Mexico and the United States, in: Hispanic American Historical Review 89 (2009) 4, pp. 603–641.

in the 1920s and 1930s, when a frenzy of subdivisions – rich and poor – further pushed its limits outwards. Capitalizing on its position as the main engine of an industrializing economy, Mexico City continued to grow, reaching a population of 2,250,000 (3,240,000 if the entire Federal District is included) in 1950. Hundreds of thousands migrated to the city, finding a dwelling in the self-built neighbourhoods in the peripheries of the city. Against all odds, Mexico City would become one of the largest cities of the world by the end of the twentieth century.[3]

While Mexico City changed dramatically between 1880 and 1950, the *idea* of urban poverty barely did, as evidenced by the endurance of the *tugurio* as its most widespread representation. Since the turn of the twentieth century, the "horseshoe of slums" was one of the most studied areas in the city if not the world. Starting in the 1890s, sanitary inspectors surveyed the area, describing its "filthy, dirty, and abandoned houses […] where a combination of men and animals lived."[4] In the following decades, criminologists, journalists, sociologists, and anthropologists would also study the area, from sociologist Gonzalo de Murga, who lamented in 1913 that industrial cities triggered "the physical and moral degeneration of people," to Oscar Lewis, whose research in Colonia Morelos in the 1950s gave origin to the influential – and infamous – theory of the "culture of poverty."[5]

Beginning in the 1930s, economists, architects, and planners began surveying the "horseshoe of slums." These professionals understood the area primarily in terms of its housing deficit rather than its criminality. It was in this decade when the area became primarily known as the epicentre of the so-called "housing problem". The Banco Nacional Hipotecario y de Obras Públicas (National Bank of Mortgages and Public Works, BNHOP) led the effort, surveying housing conditions in order to decide where to finance and build housing social housing. The activities of the BNHOP boosted in the late-1940s, building 12,000 units between 1947 and 1952. This number represented a six-fold increase from the earlier period, when "no serious efforts to fix the problem of popular housing" was undertaken.[6] As important as the number was the spectacular nature of some of these constructions. The Juárez and Miguel Alemán housing projects, designed by modernist architect Mario Pani – a follower of Le Corbusier well connected with Mexico's political and economic elites – were instantly hailed as landmarks and remain symbols of the mid-century Mexican Miracle.[7]

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3   For population numbers, see A. R. Kuri, La Experiencia Olvidada. El Ayuntamiento de México: política y gobierno, 1876–1912, Mexico City: 1996, p. 92; and D. Davis, Urban Leviathan, Philadelphia 1994, p. 329.

4   C.S. de Salubridad, Informes Rendidos por los Inspectores Sanitarios de Cuartel y los de Distrito al Consejo Superior de Salubridad, Mexico City 1895, p. 11.

5   G. de Murga, Atisbos Sociológicos. El Fraccionamiento de Tierras. Las Habitaciones Baratas, in: Boletín de la Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística, Quinta época, Tomo VI (1913), p. 485. Lewis conducted his research in the 1950s, leading to the publication of *Five Families* (1959) and *The Children of Sánchez* (1961).

6   F. Sánchez, La Realidad Mexicana y las Nuevas Concepciones Arquitectónicas Urbanísticas en Material de Habitación Popular, in: Estudios 1 (1952), p. 48.

7   E.A. de Anda, Vivienda Colectiva de la Modernidad en México: Los Multifamiliares Durante el Periodo Presidencial de Miguel Alemán (1946–1952), Mexico City 2011.

It was amidst such optimism that President Miguel Alemán Valdés (1946–1952) ordered that the BNHOP organize a conference on popular housing. Adolfo Zamora, director of the BNHOP, confidently claimed at the conference inauguration in 1950 that the "war against the *tugurio*" had begun.[8] While the war began in 1950, preparations commenced much earlier, as evidenced by Zamora's long-term engagement with the housing question as an organizer of housing surveys that sought to quantify housing conditions in Mexico City. Trained as a lawyer at the National University, Zamora joined the BNHOP in 1933 – after a brief stint in Paris – becoming its director in 1947. Zamora considered himself an adoptive son of Mexico's capital city (he was born in Nicaragua) and something of a flâneur as well, someone who for thirty years wondered around the streets of Mexico City, discovering "its perspectives one by one, and read[ing] full of emotion the Braille of its palaces and tugurios."[9]

Zamora organized or participated in three housing surveys – in 1935, 1946, and 1952 – all of which centred on the problem of the *tugurio*. The 1935 "Study of Mexico City" focused on low-income housing from an "urban, architectural, and social" perspective. The survey identified 100,000 overcrowded and insalubrious houses where half a million people lived. Zamora proposed replacing these dwellings with hygienic units in order to protect residents from "tuberculosis, rickets, typhus, and all the vileness, depravity, and disease that are incubated in [these] pigsties."[10] This solution, razing down slums and replacing them with modern housing (urban renewal, in short), became an unquestioned – if not always easily implemented – policy recipe, developed by emulators of Baron Haussmann and Le Corbusier and tested in cities throughout the world.[11]

The second survey, the 1947 "Investigation about the housing problem in Mexico City," reproduced this approach. Directed by architect Félix Sánchez, the survey understood the housing problem, essentially, as the problem of *tugurios* or *vecindades*. The latter word is probably better known, and it still commonly used. A *vecindad* consisted of several one or two-room dwellings distributed around a central patio or corridor. The "horseshoe of slums" consisted mostly of *vecindades*, but while this word designated a specific group of homes around a courtyard, *tugurio* was usually used to name a larger area of the city. (Accordingly, *vecindad: tugurio* are roughly equivalent to tenement: slum in the American context). The survey added two transitional categories: "*jacales*" (shacks) and "*zonas decadentes*" (decaying areas). Located in the outskirts of the city and lacking public services, shacks were provisional homes built with improvised materials. "*Zonas decadentes*"

8   BNHOP, Memoria de las Conferencias Sobre Habitación Popular Organizadas por el BNHOP, Mexico City 1950, p. 19.

9   Estudios 6 (1952), III. Biographic Information from Roderic Ai Camp, Mexican Political Biographies, 1935–1993 (3d ed.), Austin 1995, p. 746.

10   Ibid., p. 4.

11   A. Zamora, "Memo" [1937], Carlos Lazo Archive, Archivo General de la Nación [Mexico], Box 89, File 8. For transnational histories of urban renewal policies, see C. Klemek, The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism from New York to Berlin, Chicago 2012; A. Mayne, Slums: The History of a Global Injustice, London, 2017.

were better-off areas in a process of deterioration, usually adjacent to slums. The unstated assumption was that, with time, they would become slums as well.[12]

A note on my translations might be necessary at this point, lest the reader become overwhelmed by a flurry of Spanish terms. In translating *tugurios* as slums I am following American and Mexican social scientists who resorted to this translation to make sense of urban processes that they considered universal. Oscar Lewis, for instance, described the Casa Grande *vecindad* where he conducted his research as a "slum tenement, in the heart of Mexico City."[13] Lewis interrogated his informants about the history of Colonia Morelos as he tried to figure out where exactly the neighbourhood fit in Ernest W. Burgess' ecological model.[14] Sociologist Norman S. Hayner – as Lewis, a follower of anthropologist Robert Redfield – conducted fieldwork in Oaxaca and Mexico City in order to study social change in traditional societies. In 1945, Hayner used the word *vecindades* to describe Mexico's slums, which he located north, east, and south of the city centre, following Adolfo Zamora's mapping of poverty.[15] In a longer, revised version of his findings published in his 1966, Hayner adopted the formulation of the *herradura de tugurios*, translated as "horseshoe of slums."[16]

If American sociologists recognized *tugurios* as a version of the slum, Mexican housing experts read them as familiar forms in the universal script of urbanization and industrialization. Following Lewis Mumford, economist Ramón Ramírez – another participant in the 1947 survey – argued that overcrowded *tugurios* were the result of housing shortages produced by the industrial city. Full of nostalgia for a Golden Age, Ramírez deplored the "divorce between city and countryside" as well as the overcrowding and promiscuity of the modern city.[17] This vision of industrialization and urban growth, written by a Mexican economist in 1952, was slightly off the mark. Industrialization, rural-urban migration, and overcrowding existed in Mexico City, but not to the same degree as in North Atlantic industrial cities or as the result of the same causal relationships. Nightmarish visions of overcrowded slums notwithstanding, Mexico City was a flat and low-density city. Or at least much of it was. According to Hannes Meyer – the Bauhaus urban planner who came to Mexico in 1939 to direct the Planning Institute of the Instituto Politécnico Nacional (National Polytechnic Institute (INV) – Mexico City had one of the lowest densities in the world: its 1,464,556 residents were spread across 134 square kilometers, amounting to an average of 109 residents per hectare. The "horseshoe of slums," however, was a different story, peopled by an average 691 residents per hectare.[18]

12   BNHOP, Memoria de las conferencias sobre habitación popular organizadas por el BNHOP, p. 139.

13   O. Lewis, The Children of Sánchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family, New York 1961, xxv.

14   E. de Antuñano, Mexico City as an Urban Laboratory: Oscar Lewis, the 'Culture of Poverty', and the Transnational History of the Slum, in: Journal of Urban History 45 (2019) 4, p. 820.

15   Mexico City: Its Growth and Configuration, in: The American Journal of Sociology 50 (1945) 4, pp. 295–304.

16   New Patterns in Old Mexico, New Haven 1966, p. 61.

17   R. Ramírez, El Problema de la Habitación y Sus Aspectos Generales y en la Ciudad de México, in: Estudios 1 (1952), p. 62.

18   La Ciudad de México. Fragmentos de un Estudio Urbanístico, in: Arquitectura/México 12 (1943), pp. 96–109.

Remarkably, *colonias proletarias* were not included in the housing surveys of 1935 and 1947, even though hundreds of thousands of people had moved to these peripheral neighbourhoods during that period. What are the reasons for this omission? In the first place, most *colonias proletarias* were located in the peripheral districts (*delegaciones*) of the Federal District, outside the city limits. The cadastral plan did not include these areas that popular imagination still considered rural and bucolic spaces. As already mentioned, *colonias proletarias* were intimately entangled with myriad city offices, mostly in the political sections of the city government.[19] They were a key component of the city governance but they were, so to speak, off the map. It would seem natural to posit a relationship between this invisibility and political powerlessness. But invisibility did not amount to political irrelevance, far from it. At the margins of housing surveys, cadastral maps, and the purview of architects and urban planners, *colonias proletarias* flexed strong political muscles and were far from marginal: they were steadily growing and successfully acquiring public services. The 1940s were, in fact, the period when they had the most political leverage – precisely when they were not included in architectural surveys.

In the second place, the hypervisibility of the slum diverted the gaze of experts from the city margins to the centre. This refraction took place in many other cities in the Global South, where turn-of-century city centre tenements continued to be considered the epicentre of the housing problem decades after their population, relative to the city total, had plummeted.[20] Oscar Lewis' *Five Families* (1959) included a chapter on a *colonia proletaria*, but the rest of the book, and the entirety of *The Children of Sánchez* (1961), took place in the "horseshoe of slums," whose stigmatization as an urban problem had been cemented by decades of studies by social scientists and policymakers. According to its resident chroniclers, the barrio of Tepito – the most emblematic neighbourhood of this area – is "more than 400 years old […] and thus for us the social sciences are the sciences of human stupidity [*pendejez humana*], for they have undoubtedly fucked us over [*nos ha ido como en feria*]."[21] Such was the inertia of the decades of studies, so powerful the fears and fascination elicited by the slum, that little attention was left to direct elsewhere.

2. The "Discovery" of *Colonias Proletarias*

Zamora and his colleagues at the BNHOP did not acknowledge the existence of *colonias proletarias* until 1952, when they were finally included as a housing category in its landmark survey: "The Housing Problem in Mexico City."[22] The seven-month research project, by far the most complete to date, was based on the work of an army of surveyors

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19   Colonias Proletarias were under the Authority of the Oficina de Colonias, within the Gobernación Section of the City Government.

20   For a similar observation, regarding Buenos Aires, see J. Moya, Settling in the City, in: Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850–1930, Berkeley 1998.

21   A. Hernández et. al., Tepito Para los Tepiteños, in: J. Alonso, coord., Los Movimientos Sociales en el Valle de México, Mexico City 1984, p. 334.

22   The survey was published as a special number of Estudios, the journal of the BNHOP.

who distributed questionnaires, conducted interviews, and analyzed blueprints, cadastral maps, and aerial photographs.[23] The goal of "The Housing Problem in Mexico City" was twofold: providing a diagnosis of housing conditions and coming up with a plan to fix them. While the survey, unsurprisingly, did not fix the housing problem, it did reframe it, and its categories became a fixture for decades to come. *Colonias proletarias* were described as a recent phenomenon, the product of a migratory crisis, and an urban form akin to squatter or "parachutist" settlements (*colonias paracaidistas*).[24] Based on this assessment, scholars often consider, equivocally, the 1940s as the decade of explosion of Mexico City's informal city.[25]

It is worth remarking on three key difficulties faced by Zamora and his team. First, their survey attempted to capture in time a dynamic landscape marked by regional and intra-urban movements of people. Therefore, the categories they used failed to acknowledge how different housing forms were changing. Second, surveyors mapped housing conditions throughout large sectors of the city, but did not capture inequalities within neighbourhoods or city blocks. This method offered the picture of a city where the social class and economic function of neighbourhoods were clearly demarcated and matched into one another. Finally, and most importantly, the survey categorized *colonias proletarias* essentially as an urban form – by analyzing their density, location, and physical conditions – but it did not consider them as a legal, administrative, or political unit. Each of these issues – change, scale, and political invisibility – merits further revision.

Starting in the 1860s, the social geography of Mexico City underwent key transformations, driven by successive waves of growth. The first wave was led by wealthier classes who abandoned the colonial centre and moved southwest, to "modern" neighbourhoods furnished with urban services and unrestrained by the Spanish orthogonal grid. At the same time, working-class neighbourhoods were established north and east of the city centre, in more insalubrious lands, between 1880 and 1930. Whereas the first neighbourhoods were subdivided by powerful developers who provided urban services, developers of low-income neighbourhoods often disregarded municipal codes and sold lots without urban services in the area that would later be known as the horseshoe of slums. The establishment of *colonias proletarias* (after 1920) followed these patterns, reinforcing the class division between east and west. Their multiplication over the following decades, however, would dislocate this axis. Most *colonias proletarias* were located north and east, but others were settled in the west and south, beyond middle-class neighbourhoods.

According to the 1952 survey, the difference between *tugurios* and *colonias proletarias* were historical and geographical. The former were described as overcrowded, decaying, and unhygienic remnants of the old city geographically circumscribed to its centre while

23   Proyecto de Estudio de la Ciudad de México, in: Estudios 6 (1952), pp. 101–104; El Problema de la Habitación en la Ciudad de México, Estudios 6 (1952), pp. 15–26; Proyecto de Estudio de la Ciudad de México, Estudios 2 (1952), pp. 101–104.

24   El Problema de la Habitación en la Ciudad de México, p. 17.

25   See, for instance, P. Conolly, Uncontrolled Settlements and Self-build: What Kind of Solution? The Mexico City Case, in: P. Ward (ed.), Self-help Housing: A Critique, London 1982, pp. 141–174.

the latter were a more recent creation: a product of industrialization that went back ten or twelve years.[26] But this opposition blurred the more complex processes of decay and improvement that different generations of *tugurios* and *colonias proletarias* were undergoing. *Colonias proletarias* were described as unplanned neighbourhoods created from scratch and lacking urban services. With time, however, many of them densified, received urban services, and became integrated into the city, a progression that the survey did not anticipate. (Many others deteriorated, became with time *tugurios*). In other words, Zamora and his team shot a photograph rather than a film, leading them to underestimate the progressive nature of *colonias proletarias* and their possible similarities with *tugurios*.

The survey also mapped Mexico City according to rigid understandings of how cities worked and developed. Roughly following the tenets of the CIAM, it divided the city into four functions: housing, work, social services, and circulation. In regards to housing, the survey set an implicit benchmark according to which social classes, housing forms, and clearly delimited neighbourhoods matched into one another. The fact that porous boundaries between social classes and housing forms abounded was unequivocally seen as a problem; the survey disapprovingly noted that "small peddlers, bums, prostitutes, beggars, and [other] *lumpen* sectors were intermingled with industrial workers and the lower petit bourgeoisie."[27] The "human ecology" model was also used to assess Mexico City's housing conditions. Many geographers suggested that Latin American cities followed a different logic of growth from that observed by Ernest W. Burgess in Chicago.[28] Anchored to a central plaza where the commercial, political, and religious powers met, their lower-income sectors were pushed to poor suburbs while the elites stayed in the streets around the central plaza. While this is not the place to assess these debates, it is important to point out the common assumption that Burgess and his challengers shared: that territorial units had a single function and were occupied primarily by a social class. Housing officials were eager to format complex urban configurations under such headings as "industrial zones" and "low-income housing."[29]

Clearly this was not the case for Mexico City, where multiple uses and housing forms coexisted in a single block. According to the BNHOP, this coexistence had been produced by the recent transformations of the city, which had not reached the "rigid forms" of more advanced cities.[30] Since "different residential areas did not have a single housing form," surveyors decided to categorize city block as "homogenous," based on the housing form that predominated.[31] This decision was partly the outcome of the research tools

26   El Problema de la Habitación en la Ciudad de México, p. 187.
27   Ibid., p. 49.
28   N.S. Hayner, Mexico City: Its Growth and Configuration, in: The American Journal of Sociology 50 (1945) 4, pp. 295–304; F. Dotson and L.O. Dotson, La Estructura Ecológica de las Ciudades Mexicanas, in: Revista Mexicana de Sociología 19 (1957) 1, pp. 39–66.
29   G. Ortiz and C. Vilaseñor, Desarrollo de las Colonias Proletarias de la Ciudad de México, in: Boletín de la Sociedad Mexicana de Urbanismo 2 (1962), pp. 23–27.
30   El Problema de la Habitación en la Ciudad de México, p. 49.
31   Ibid., p. 40.

at the disposal of surveyors – sample surveys and questionnaires distributed by a small team – as well as the shortcomings that they faced; for instance, there was not a complete cadastral plan of the city, and numerous neighbourhoods lacked official blueprints. But the decision to map the city as a mosaic of discrete and homogenous city zones also reveals the power of models diffused by the CIAM and the Chicago School of Sociology. Finally, "The Housing Problem in Mexico City" did not analyze *colonias proletarias* as a political and administrative unit but as an architectural and urban form. The survey made only a fleeting reference to the government participation in the establishment of *colonias proletarias* (it referenced the "improper" grants of public land that gave origin to them), but it did not mention the sui generis urban code regulating them, the patronage networks buttressing them, and the key official recognition that the city government awarded them.[32] Rather than addressing these linkages with political power, the survey examined the neighbourhoods' infrastructure, the material conditions of their houses, and their position in relation to the larger city. Were *colonias proletarias* communicated with the city centre? Did they have access to schools and markets? What was their population density? In asking such questions, the survey construed *colonias proletarias* as an urban pathology and not as constitutive of Mexico City's political structures, a complex web of politicking that entangled the city government, official and independent brokers, and organizations of "urban poor."[33]

3. Government Policy Towards *Colonias Proletarias*

The fact that *colonias proletarias* were initially understood as the sign of an unforeseen crisis was extremely consequential, for it justified a battery of municipal policies passed in the 1950s prohibiting new subdivisions and severely restricting the provision of urban services. The dilemma for the city government was, in the words of conservative architect Mauricio Gómez Mayorga, that "providing urban services to the nightmarish swarm of colonias proletarias established an urban cancer and fueled its flourishing".[34]

Although the city government adopted a strict anti-growth policy in the 1950s, once housing officials identified *colonias proletarias* as the most important low-income housing form in the city, they faced the task of devising policies towards them (towards those that already existed). It was a tall order, since *colonias proletarias* challenged most assumptions about the city's perennial housing problem, which up until then materialized in *tugurios*. In the 1950s, the recently created Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda (National Housing Institute, INV) continued the studies conducted in previous years by the BN-

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32   Ibid., p. 15.

33   Such political entanglements would be studied by political scientists who in the 1970s studied the relationship between the "state" and the "urban poor". Classical examples include W. A. Cornelius, Politics and the Migrant Poor in Mexico City, Stanford 1975); and S. Eckstein, The Poverty of Revolution: The State and the Urban Poor in Mexico, Princeton 1977.

34   ¿Qué Hacer por la Ciudad de México?, Mexico City 1957, p. 48.

HOP.[35] Architect Félix Sánchez, the main author of the 1952 BNHOP survey, led the INV studies, evidencing the continuities between both institutions. The INV divided its efforts between *tugurios* and *colonias proletarias*, to each of which it consecrated a research team. This binary crystallized a vast, confusing, and shifting landscape. While *tugurios* were old, *colonias proletarias* were new. While *tugurios* were in, or close to, the city centre, *proletarias* were located in the peripheries of the city. While residents of *tugurios* paid rent, inhabitants of *proletarias* owned their own lots (or were buying them through monthly payments). *Tugurios* were overcrowded and close to markets, schools, and other urban facilities. *Colonias proletarias* were sparsely populated and lacked urban services. While overcrowded *tugurios* bred incest, crime, and corruption, residents of *proletarias* suffered from social anomie because they lacked spaces of sociability.

The 1952 survey offered a bleak image of *colonias proletarias*, describing them as spaces of despair and hopelessness, where an overburdened government was incapable of distributing urban services. Over the 1950s, however, housing officials adopted a more positive stance towards them. This optimism was borne from a key insight about the differences between *colonias proletarias* and *tugurios*. Whereas the latter were decaying, many *colonias proletarias* were progressive environments, amenable to improvement through the provision of urban services and targeted interventions.

Two young architects from IPN, David Cymet and Guillermo Ortiz, spearheaded the study of *colonias proletarias* in the 1950s. Established by a cohort of radical architects in 1937, the IPN's School of Architecture and Engineering welded the practices of architecture and engineering together to produce a pragmatic and politically progressive approach to the housing question. When architect Ricardo Pérez Rayón, a graduate of the school, became the head of Mexico City's Master Plan Office in the 1950s, he invited Cymet and Ortiz to join him in devising a policy towards *colonias proletarias*.[36] In a 1955 study, they calculated 279 *colonias proletarias*, adding to around a quarter of the population of the city (736,035).[37] Most of these neighbourhoods were lacking in myriad ways: 85% lacked paved streets; 57% lacked schools; 72% did not have a market; 80% did not have parks and gardens; 45% lacked sewage; and 35% lacked water. Rather than tearing them down – alas, there was little to bring down – the way to fix *colonias proletarias* was providing them with urban services and helping residents improve their homes. Cymet and Ortiz considered that *colonias proletarias* not only lacked urban services but the "organs integrating an urban community: workplaces, markets, churches, gardens, sports facilities, recreation centres, etc."[38] Whereas the 1952 survey saw *colonias proletarias* as a

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35   Representative INV studies include Colonias Proletarias: Problemas y Soluciones, Mexico City 1958; Herradura de Tugurios: Problemas y Soluciones, Mexico City, 1958; Una Ciudad Perdida, Mexico City, 1968.

36   On P. Rayón's work at the Master Plan Office, see "Entrevista Realizada a Reinaldo Pérez Rayón, Realizada por Graciela de Garay, el día 2 de Octubre de 1991 en la Ciudad de México". Archivo de la Palabra del Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora.

37   El Problema de las Colonias Proletarias en la Ciudad de México, Mexico City 1955, p. 66.

38   Colonias Proletarias: Problemas y Soluciones, p. 9.

discrete housing problem, plans for them became increasingly embedded within broader urbanistic and sociological frameworks.

In 1958, the INV proposed a 4-point programme for *colonias proletarias*: demolishing houses beyond repair; improving conditions of houses that could still be saved; increasing population density by building houses in *colonias proletarias*; and providing households with technical and credit assistance for improving and building their homes.[39] The first point – urban renewal – was reminiscent of earlier projects to replace *tugurios*. But the novelties of the programme outweighed past inertias and represented a transition to a new housing policy. In the first place, the plan to increase population density in *colonias proletarias* constituted a radical and counterintuitive idea since the housing problem had always been inextricably linked with overcrowding. Secondly, the INV *began* to recognize the impossibility of demolishing deficient houses and the futility of pushing them outside of the law. Instead, it recognized the existence of *colonias proletarias* as well as the work that residents had already invested in them, which the INV viewed as a foundation for further improvements. The INV sought to establish a partnership with neighbourhood residents in order to build structurally sound, inexpensive houses.[40] It prepared and distributed building manuals to help untrained residents build their own houses in a cheap and efficient manner. Manuals included information on materials and construction techniques and were also designed to foster collaborations between residents, architects, engineers, and social workers.[41] The "integral improvement" programme for Colonia Agrícola Oriental, for instance, developed as a "possible model" for other neighbourhoods, included the building of a thousand houses as well as the provision of counseling and subsidized materials so that residents could improve their homes.[42] Underlying all of these actions was a more ambitious drive to develop communities in environments often described as lifeless, "devoid of water and trees, resembling a desert."[43] But these were limited efforts that did not amount to a forceful city policy. The INV did not have the monopoly over urban and housing policies, so *colonias proletarias* were entangled in myriad government offices, including the Ministry of Health, the city government, and public banks who provided mortgages. The most consequential policy was the building of around 1,600 houses in colonias Gabriel Ramos Millán, Agrícola Oriental, and San Juan de Aragón.[44]

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39 Ibid., p. 13.

40 Ibid., p. 11.

41 B. Frieden, The Search for Housing Policy in Mexico City, in: The Town Planning Review 36 (July 1965) 2, p. 91; A.G. Cortéz, Cartilla de la Vivienda, in: El Universal (16 May 1957).

42 "Plan de Mejoramiento Integral de la Colonia Agrícola Oriental," Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter AGN), Fondo Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda (hereafter INV), Box 1.

43 Guillermo Ortiz Flores, "La Vivienda Popular," AGN, INV, Box 12.

44 Most houses (around 1,000) were built in San Juan de Aragón, a number that would be increased by ten when the city government later built a unit there. See A. Escudero, Conjunto Urbano San Juan de Aragón, in: E.A. Alonso / G.Á. Montes (eds.), El Espacio Habitacional en la Arquitectura Moderna: Colonias, Fraccionamientos, Unidades Habitacionales, Equipamiento Urbano y Protagonistas, Mexico City 2013, pp. 187–202.

The limited power of the INV is further evidenced by the policy of growth restriction that the city government implemented during the 1950s, beginning with the tenure of regent Ernesto P. Uruchurtu (1953–1966). More than any other regent before or since, Uruchurtu sought to restrict urban growth, a goal pursued through the enforcement of urban codes and the tight control over the distribution of urban services (water most importantly).[45] His law and order approach to government won him the support of the city's middle-classes, allowing him to remain in office for an unprecedented thirteen years. The 1950s thus witnessed a paradoxical dual process: on the one hand, the city government restricted growth while local and federal housing offices sought to improve conditions in *colonias proletarias* and integrate them into the city.

This progressive shift in the policy towards *colonias proletarias* dovetailed with – and was part of – a larger Pan-American dialogue about the housing question. As shown by a growing historiography, the 1950s were animated by hemispheric discussions about housing, urbanization, and modernization more broadly. Seminars and congresses were convened; think tanks and institutions created. This expert dialogue – which counted with the participation of officials from national governments and international institutions, as well as academics from different disciplines – gave a theoretical, institutional, and ideological existence to the idea of the "Latin American city."[46] Two key interrelated principles emerging from this dialogue pinpoint the new approach towards *colonias proletarias*: the policy of aided self-help (and the benefits of self-construction more broadly) and the notion of "slums of hope," the realization that "squatter settlements" could be progressive environments that improved with time.

Before 1950, most social scientists and political observers referred indistinctly to central slums and squatter settlements, both of which they understood as spaces of economic deprivation, cultural backwardness, and moral vice.[47] However, such sweeping analyses of urban poverty would be replaced by more granular and dynamic studies that recognized the progressive nature of squatter settlements. John F.C. Turner's work in Peruvian *barriadas* praised the advantages of self-construction and the power of communities to collaborate in order to build their homes and neighbourhoods. Turner arrived in Peru at a

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45   There are significant gaps in our understanding of the government of Uruchurtu. Evidence for the denial of urban services to "clandestine neighbourhoods" can be found in Archivo Histórico de la Ciudad de México, Fondo Obras Públicas, box 86, bundle 1.

46   This proposition is advanced by Adrián Gorelik in several writings. Recent works on these exchanges that have informed my thinking include A. Gorelik, Miradas sobre Buenos Aires; L. Benmergui, The Alliance for Progress and Housing Policy in Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires, in: Urban History 36 (2009) 2, pp. 303–326; H. Gyger, Improvised Cities: Architecture, Urbanization, and Innovation in Peru, Pittsburgh 2019; A. Offner, Homeownership and Social Welfare in the Americas: Ciudad Kennedy as a Midcentury Crossroads, in: Sandoval-Strausz / Kwak (eds.), Making Cities Global, pp. 47–70; P. Connolly, La Ciudad y el Hábitat Popular: Paradigma Latinoamericano, in: B.R. Ramírez Velázquez / E.P. Cobos (eds.), Teorías sobre la Ciudad en América Latina, Mexico City 2013, pp. 505–562; B. Fischer, A Century in Present Tense: Crisis, Politics, and Intellectual History of Brazil's Informal Cities, in: B. Fischer / J. Auyero / B. McCann (eds.), Cities from Scratch: Poverty and Informality in Latin America, Durham 2014), pp. 9–67.

47   This point was made by W. Mangin, Latin American Squatter Settlements: A Problem and a Solution, in: Latin American Research Review 2 (1967) 3, pp. 65–98. Of course, broad generalizations on Latin American or global slums continue to be made.

time when the country became a key laboratory for the study of self-construction, squatter settlements, and rural-urban migration. Turner was well positioned to amplify these ideas in venues like the widely-read *Architectural Design*.[48] In 1967, anthropologist William Mangin – who worked with Turner in Peru – identified a number of myths about squatter settlements in an influential article. Firstly, squatter settlements were formed by rural (or indigenous) people who "reconstituted" their social organization in the city. Secondly, settlements were chaotic and disorganized, breeding ground for crime, family breakdown, and political radicalism. Finally, settlements did not participate in city life; they were, in fact, an "economic drain on the nation:" unproductive, unemployed, and diverting work from the agricultural sector.[49] Mangin understood squatter settlements differently. He viewed their residents as "less alienated from the national state and more involved with each other than residents of central city slums," largely because they could look around and see "a major accomplishment of their own, i.e., the seizure of land and the creation of a community."[50]

Mexican *colonias proletarias* began to be seen in this light in the 1950s, as evolving INV studies make clear. Seen through a Pan-American lens, they were part of a larger family of Latin American squatter settlements that included, in Mangin's listing, "*barriadas bruja* in Panama, *ranchos* in Venezuela, *barriadas* in Peru, *callampas* in Chile, *cantegriles* in Uruguay, *favelas* in Brazil and, in other places, marginal areas, clandestine urbanizations, *barrios* of invasion, parachutists, phantom towns, etc."[51] It did not really matter that *colonias proletarias* rarely were originated from squatter invasions and that most of them were sanctioned or actively supported by the government. By the 1960s, they had become the Mexican version of Latin America's "slums of hope," leading Turner to compare them with Lima's *barriadas*.[52] Reviewing Mexico's housing policy, Turner's colleague at M.I.T, Bernard Freiden, summarized the new consensus when he described *colonias proletarias* as "the most significant step in solving the housing problem of Mexico City."[53] By the time Wayne Cornelius published his influential *Politics and the Migrant Poor* in 1975, the vindication of *colonias proletarias* was definitive. Their residents were pragmatic, risk-averse, and working along with the municipal government in order to improve their homes and their neighbourhoods. "Central-city slums," on the other hand, were "the worst-low income dwelling environments in the city."[54] Cornelius' originality lay in his

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48 On Turner's work in Peru, see H. Gyger, Improvised Cities. Before Turner's diffusion of these ideas, experiments in aided self-help had been tried out in other contexts (often colonial), such as Puerto Rico. On this earlier history, see R. Harris, The Silence of Experts: 'Aided self-help' housing, 1939–1954, in: Habitat International 22 (1998) 2, pp. 165–189.

49 W. Mangin, Latin American Squatter Settlements, p. 66.

50 Ibid., p. 74.

51 W. Mangin, Latin American Squatter Settlements, p. 65.

52 Barriers and Channels for Housing Development in Modernizing Countries, in: Journal of the American Institute of Planners, 33 (1967) 3, pp, 167–181.

53 The Search for Housing Policy in Mexico City, p. 81.

54 Ibid., p. 28. By the early 1980s, the optimism had waned, and the dominant view of the squatter settlements as progressive spaces received a backlash. See P. Ward (ed.), Self-Help Housing: A Critique, London 1982; and S.

analysis of the relationship between *colonias proletarias* and the Mexican political system. But in his assessment of *colonias proletarias* as progressive neighbourhoods, he was riding the scholarly wave.

For scholars from the period between 1950 and 1970, peripheral squatter settlements represented an urban version of the frontier in U.S. history: an empty space to be colonized through the hard toil of settlers. But just as the myth of the frontier in American history erased Native American histories, the idea of the urban periphery as an empty space transformed by industrious settlers (small capitalist entrepreneurs in Hernando de Soto's influential interpretation) was blind to the political and juridical entanglements that shaped these neighbourhoods.[55] In the case of Mexico City's *colonias proletarias*, this blindness is all the more remarkable because, as I have argued, they were sponsored by several government offices and the object of a policy that reached a remarkable degree of institutionalization during the 1940s. *Colonias proletarias* were listed in an official register and were part of a (de facto) bureaucratic regime in the 1940s. Hundreds of *colonias proletarias* were established in this decade, oftentimes following government expropriations justified by the legal principle of the social function of property (*función social de la propiedad*). The payment and installation of urban services in *colonias proletarias* was negotiated between the city government and residents who flexed strong political muscle in the 1940s.[56] This de facto policy was less the product of an expert understanding of the housing problem than the outcome of a political crucible in a post-revolutionary city. It was less a policy than a politics – borne not at the desktops of architects and planners but in negotiations between government officials, political brokers, and residents, at a time when the winds of Mexico's revolution were still blowing.

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Colonias proletarias were rediscovered by housing experts in the 1950s and 1960s, first as an urgent problem and then as a possible solution to the housing problem, a stance that was partially framed by the language of aided self-help and community organizing of the period. Nonetheless, this expert rediscovery of *colonias proletarias* – a progressive expertise, opposed to authoritarian modernist planning – was quite myopic towards the politics that first allowed their flourishing in the decades of the 1930s and 1940s. The change by which squatter settlements went from "problem" to "solution" was not an ex-

Eckstein, Urbanization Revisited: Inner-City Slum of Hope and Squatter Settlement of Despair, in: World Development 18 (1990) 2, pp. 165–181.

55   A. Roy, Transnational Trespassings: The Geopolitics of Urban Informality, in: A. Roy and N. AlSayad (ed.), Urban Informality: Transnational Perspectives from the Middle East, Latin America, and South Asia, Lanham 2004), p. 308. My deployment of the myth of the urban frontier to the urban margins is also informed by K. Brown, Gridded Lives: Why Kazakhstan and Montana are Nearly the Same Place, in: Dispatches from Dystopia: Histories of Places Not Yet Forgotten, Chicago 2015.

56   On these policies, see M.P. Cohen, Política y Vvienda en México, 1910–1952, in: Revista Mexicana de Sociología 41 (1981) 3, pp. 769–835; A. Azuela / M.S. Cruz, La Institucionalización de las Colonias Populares y la Política Urbana en la Ciudad de México (1940–1946), in: Sociológica 4 (1989) 9, pp. 111–133; C.S. Mejorada, Rezagos de la Modernidad: Memorias de una Ciudad Presente, Mexico City 2005.

ceptional Mexican story. Everywhere the tide changed. But the Mexican case differs from that of other Latin American countries because *colonias proletarias* had been hailed as a solution, *by government officials*, much earlier, since the 1930s and 1940s. Therefore, in the span of twenty years they went from 1) a political solution to the housing problem, to 2) an invisible urban form, to 3) the manifestation of an urban crisis, to 4) a solution, imperfect but plausible, to the challenge of popular urban expansion.

This transformation is ridden with ironies. The 1940s, the period when *colonias proletarias* were invisible for housing officials, was also the decade when they were most powerful politically. *Colonias proletarias* thrived during this decade, when their residents pushed the expansion of the city through negotiations with political brokers and city officials. The failure of architects to recognize this process did not undermine its success. It simply underscores the importance that international models had for reading or misreading what was happening in Mexico City. The growth of *colonias proletarias* was under the radar because these neighborhoods challenged a global narrative of urban modernity, growth, and decay modelled on North-Atlantic cities. But their magnitude and importance as the preferred housing option for the city's working classes is undeniable. *Colonias proletarias* improved over time. They were, in the words of sociologist Emilio Duhau, "progressive" housing forms.[57] They were also, as numerous authors starting in the 1970s pointed out, a bedrock of Mexico's authoritarian political system.[58] And yet, this centrality was hard to see before the 1950s.

In further irony, the reappraisal of *colonias proletarias* by housing experts as progressive neighborhoods, pregnant with possibilities for self-construction and grassroots community-building, coincided with the tenure of Ernesto P. Uruchurtu, whose government sought to halt the establishment of new low-income neighborhoods. While targeted interventions to improve *colonias proletarias* were conducted by government offices, the organizations of residents that successfully pushed for the creation of more neighborhoods in the 1930s and 1940s lost legitimacy, power, and autonomy over the following two decades. This loss was concomitant with the public stance towards *colonias proletarias*, which deteriorated after 1950. References to *colonias proletarias* as squatter settlements, illegal neighborhoods, and drains on the municipal finances became more common, precisely when experts began to see them in a more positive light.

The category *colonia proletaria* holds an exceptional polysemy and carried vastly different meanings across different fields: as an administrative category within the city bureaucracy, as a political organization claiming a place in a city, as an object of expert knowledge, and as a figment of the imagination and fears of Mexico City's middle classes. The difficulty – for the historian if not necessarily for the historical actor – is that these perspectives and their chronologies do not neatly align with each other. The power of Mexican housing experts to design progressive and consequential policies to-

57   The Informal City: An Enduring Slum or a Progressive Habitat, in: B. Fischer / B. McCann / J. Auyero (eds.), Cities from Scratch: Poverty and Informality in Urban Latin America, Durham 2014, pp. 150–169.

58   W. Cornelius and S. Eckstein, referenced in footnote 33, are classic examples.

wards *colonias proletarias* paled in the face of the city government, eager to please the middle-classes, curtail urban growth, and move away from the radicalism of the Mexican Revolution. Extremely successful as a politics of land and services distribution in post-revolutionary Mexico City, *colonias proletarias* were much less consequential as a policy of aided self-help and community development in the 1950s and 1960s. Transnational housing policies and national and city politics were not in sync with each other and, in the end, the latter proved more important in defining Mexico City's housing problem for the remainder of the century.